



Memorial Day: Values That Endure

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

“Those who say that we’re in a time where there are no heroes --- they just don’t know where to look.”

--Ronald Reagan

We pause this week to observe Memorial Day, our annual tribute to those brave men and women who have sacrificed throughout our nation’s history to preserve our liberty. It’s particularly important to remind our young people that the unparalleled freedom they enjoy today did not appear by happenstance. It was won and preserved through the efforts of those who paid the ultimate price on our behalf.

Most of us have wondered from time to time whether the values that have made America great are being forgotten by our younger generation. Has our prosperity, and a self-satisfied complacency, caused us to lose the very spirit that makes this country the beacon of freedom throughout the world? Do we still have the will to do what is necessary to preserve our liberty?

A country’s regard for its past can often be judged by the way it prepares for its future. Happily, there are signs we have not lost our grounding.

In a few weeks, recent high school graduates from across the country are leaving to join the entering class at our major military academies. One of my honors as a Senator is nominating men and women to these top schools, where officers for the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard and Merchant Marine are trained. The positions are highly competitive and decisions are based on merit. It’s heartening to see the values and patriotism among the hundreds of able candidates who apply for these coveted positions.

We expect no less from young Texans. Their willingness to serve stands in stark contrast to the values exhibited at some national universities, where authorities have attempted to ban military recruiters from their campuses. This week I’m meeting with 30 Texans appointed to the military academies this year, and I’m now doubly convinced they represent the best and the brightest that our communities have ever produced.

Army Pfc. Matthew Aaron Briggs, a graduate of Cy-Springs High School in Katy, Texas, enlisted in the service after graduating from high school, and he’s currently serving a one-year tour in Iraq. Next fall, he will enter the United States Military Academy at West Point.

Pfc. Briggs will arrive a step ahead of most plebes. He has already earned the National Defense Medal, the Global War on Terror Medal and an Army Service Ribbon. He has “expert” weapons ratings on the M9, grenades, and bayonet; “sharpshooter” on the M16; and “marksman” on the M4.

Raised by his mother, Pfc. Briggs spent much time in high school caring for his younger brother. He told me he considers his appointment to officer school “the opportunity of a lifetime.”

Emma L. Rush, a graduate of Randolph High School

in Universal City, Texas, dreams of becoming a fighter pilot in the Air Force. She comes by her ambitions naturally. Her father and her grandfather served as Air Force pilots, and her uncle is currently serving in Iraq.

“Although I have moved between each year of high school, my dream has not changed. ... I want to be an Air Force officer to have the privilege of serving my country and fulfilling my duty as an American citizen,” Miss Rush said. She is bilingual, a National Honor Society member, and she’ll make her mark at the United States Air Force Academy starting this summer.

Luke Patrick Finney graduated from the Academy of Science and Technology at Oak Ridge High School in Conroe, Texas, this month – with a 4.0 grade average. He was the Rotary Student of the Year and a member of the Civil Air Patrol for five years. He also completed an 80-hour internship at NASA, the Naval Academy summer seminar and the Air Force Academy summer seminar.

Finney will attend the United States Naval Academy in the fall, following in the footsteps of his great-grandfather and four brothers, all of whom served with distinction in the Navy. He told me his goal is becoming a fighter pilot or a Navy SEAL. “I feel that it is my duty to protect this great nation of ours, and I want to do my part,” he said.

The U.S. is in a long war against terrorism. As memories of Sept. 11 fade, and as many of our news media emphasize the negative aspects of our struggle, it would be easy for our underlying goals to be lost or forgotten, as well.

We should recall the wisdom of Ronald Reagan, who said, “Those who say that we’re in a time where there are no heroes – they just don’t know where to look.”

These young academy entrants clearly knew where to look for their heroes. In the face of a sometimes-adverse popular culture, they have retained the ability to look far down the road, at values and truths that are enduring. They have uncommon wisdom at an early age, and the entire world will be better for it.

They follow in the footsteps of great Texans, such as Chester Nimitz, Dwight Eisenhower and Audie Murphy. The future of us all will soon be in their hands. I pray their service ultimately occurs in a time of peace, and I know that if it does, it will be because outstanding young men and women such as these are willing to serve a noble cause.

Sen. Cornyn is a member of the following Senate Committees: Armed Services, Judiciary, Budget, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Joint Economic. He is also the chairman of the subcommittees on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship and Emerging Threats and Capabilities. He served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge.

For Sen. Cornyn’s previous Texas Times columns: www.cornyn.senate.gov/column